

## **“Out of the Temple”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, March 18, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 7:1-7  
New Testament Lesson: John 2:13-22**

Some years ago, a young man who wanted to change his life went into a church and sat down in the sanctuary for awhile. He took out a piece of paper and a pencil and began writing down a long list of things that he promised he would do to change his life – a whole page of things. He signed his name at the bottom and took it up and placed it on the altar, and sat down again in the sanctuary. As he was sitting there, he began to sense the voice of God speaking softly in his own soul. And the more he listened, the more he heard God saying to him, “You’ve done it all wrong. I want you to go back up there and get the piece of paper and tear it up. And then I’ll give you another instruction.” So, the young man got out of his pew and walked up to the altar and did as the Lord told him. And then he went back and sat down in the pew and waited for the Lord to instruct him. It did not happen immediately, but finally the message came through. The Lord said to him, very gently, “Now take a piece of paper and sign your name to it at the bottom, and let me fill in all the rest!”<sup>1</sup> If we rely on what we know and how we think about things to decide what to keep and what to get rid of in our lives, we run the risk of having the Lord come to us one day and say, “You’ve done it all wrong. Let me fill you in.”

In our New Testament reading from John, Jesus sees what’s going on inside the Temple of the Lord and feels compelled to do some serious spring cleaning. Out with all the animals and the money-changers, “Take these things out of here!” shouts Jesus. “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” The Temple, since the days of King Solomon, has been the place of God’s presence in the lives of the Jewish faithful and the ancient Israelites before them. Some Christians feel the church is a special place for God’s presence, but really God is present in all places, including our souls. But, for someone who was Jewish in Jesus’ day, just to approach the temple, you had to be purified by sacrificing an animal, which, if you didn’t have one, you had to buy. Now, most of the people at the temple had traveled from far away; they had left behind all their possession to visit the Temple of the Lord God. And when they got there, they had to pay for a sacrificial animal, using the Temple coins, which they also had to purchase from the money-changers. The system was ripe for abuse. But what bothered Jesus the most was how the Temple had been overshadowed by the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. Imagine coming to church and having it be more like the mall at Independence Center with all the harsh lights and commotion, all the latest merchandise and gadgets vying for your attention, people plucking down their hard-earned money to buy more stuff, filling their houses and their closets and their

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<sup>1</sup> From Barry P. Boulware, First United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri, who got it from Norman Neaves, a colleague.

garages with more and more stuff until you can't figure out where the stuff ends and the house begins. Kind of overwhelming, isn't it? It's a wonder we have any peace and quite at all in our homes.

Now, think if this wasn't your home I'm talking about, but you – you're mind, body, and soul – so much worry and anxiety, so much frustration and anger, so much temptation and activity, and so much work and responsibility. How do we manage?

For most of us, some of the time – and for some of us most of the time – we don't manage very well at all do we? Our lives seem to be run by outside forces pulling us in all direction at once. And we crave a little peace and quite a little order and stability in our lives. But how do we find that? How do we clear away all the noise and the clutter and the demands and come into contact with our true selves? In other words, where does your stuff end and you begin? Well, according to Jesus, there's only one way to discover the true you. Clear out all the stuff and see what's left. Now, of course, we can't literally get rid of all our material possessions, all our responsibilities, and activities. But we can, from time to time, take stock of what we have in our lives and make sure that there's room in there for our true selves, and for God.

A father and son once stood looking at a lovely painting entitled "Christ At the Door Knocking," it's a picture of Jesus standing at the door awaiting entrance. The father said to the boy as they looked at the picture, "I wonder why they won't let him in!" After a moment, the boy replied, "I'll bet they're down in the basement, and they can't hear him knocking."

Think about what's in your basement – or storage space, or closet, or car trunk, or school locker. If Jesus came to the door that is your life, could you hear him knocking amidst all the clutter? Do you have the room to welcome Jesus into your mind, body, and soul, right now? Think about it. Is there a place reserved just for God in your life (and by your life, I mean outside of church)? And if not, what would it take to make more room for God in our lives? At the church Worship Committee meeting this month, David Melton brought an opening meditation based on Ezekiel 37 verse 23, which reads, "I will wash away their sin and make them clean, and I will protect them from everything that makes them unclean. They will be my people, and I will be their God." In the meditation, Patricia Day of Ontario, Canada, recalls looking for a new home with her husband and coming across a house in a beautiful, park-like location. The price was amazing; it would leave plenty of cash for renovations. "But the condition inside," says Patricia, "was nothing short of disgusting. How anyone could have lived in the home ... was beyond ... comprehension." Patricia and her husband had agreed they were willing to move into a house and do work while living there, but the clutter and the updates needed in that particular house were way too much.

When some people are challenged to make room for God in their lives, says Patricia, they recognize that there's a lot of stuff in the way. So they want to clean up their lives before they take any steps toward God. "They don't yet understand," says Patricia, "that God comes into our lives to clean us up, precisely because we can't do it for ourselves."

The first step in making room for God in your life, is not clearing it all away as best you can. After all, it's our best thinking that filled our lives with all the clutter in the first place. No, the first step is to **ask God to prioritize** all the stuff in our lives. Make a list of all the activities in your life, all the things you do – driving the kids and grandkids around, working, shopping, hobbies, recreation, sleeping, eating, hanging with friends, partying, praying, daily meditation, church, volunteering, whatever it is, make a list.

Then add below that activities list all the places of your life – your car, your house, your workspace, school, the sports field or basketball court, church, LOGOS, wherever you spend your time. Then create three columns beside your list titled “Yes”, “No”, and “Guidance From God”, or what I might call the “What to do now” column. At the top of your list of columns write this question: “Is there a place among all this stuff in my life for God?” “Yes”, “No”, or “Now what?” what do I do now in following God’s guidance in my life? Actually, I’ve set this list up for you to work with; the ushers have a worksheet for each of you when you leave. Take a worksheet and begin by filling out first three columns – list all the activities and places of your life and then check “yes” or “no” if there is or isn’t room for God in a particular activity or place. Leave the last column blank and carry your list with you over the next three weeks. And between now and Easter, listen for God to tell you what to put in the last column, the “Now What?” column. For some items, God might just say, “Take these things out of here! Stop making your life a market-place!” But for most stuff, I bet God is either already present in your life or there waiting alongside you if you are just open to it. Are you? Are you open to God being more in your life, and if so are you willing to do a little work-a little list making to discover how that might happen for you?

Jesus was open to God being in his life, so much so, that at the end of our New Testament reading, Jesus equates his own body with the Temple of the Lord. He says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” a temple which John tells us refers to Christ’s body. Jesus is saying that he is the embodiment of God, and that nothing anybody does will ever change that. And when Jesus became the new temple, he made it so that each one of us could **become a temple of the Lord**. Jesus, by taking God’s presence out of the stone Temple and bringing it into the center of his life, Jesus made it possible for us to have an encounter with the Divine Presence of God. In the words of Anglican Bishop Rowan Williams, “Jesus is our holy place, which also means that he is the promise of a new kind of holiness. Here is a life in which the detail, even the triviality, of a human story becomes the word and name of God to us, so that we know that the contours of a human story can be the presence of God. If we are so drawn into the words and acts and passion of Jesus that ... his life and death are at work in us,” says Williams, then “we become sanctuaries to each other, holy places....”<sup>2</sup>

Find a way in the weeks to come to open yourself to God’s presence in your life: use the list which you’ll get from the ushers. Be open to how God would reprioritize your life to make it a little less marketplace and a bit more Temple, a bit more fitting for the presence of God, so that each of us can be a holy place, a holy encounter for the people of God whom puts in our lives, day and day out.

**Amen**

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<sup>2</sup> *Holy Space in a Ray of Darkness* [Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1995], 87.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have gone to great risks for us. Becoming human, you allowed an element of uncertainty in your future. You gave your Son the freedom to refuse you. But Jesus took the risk of following you. He took the risk of saying 'no' when he encountered misguided ways and evil forces. He took the risk of being rejected by those who knew him best. He took the risk that even his followers wouldn't recognize him for who he was. He took the risk of dying on the cross.

We sometimes like risk in our lives, especially when it seems like it might get us a little more money or power or admiration. But we shy away from the risk of giving it all away, of letting go of our set ways of being and embracing who you would have us be. Help us to take the risk of following you. You know it isn't easy for us to give you all of who we are. We'd like to play it safe, to keep a portion of our lives back for our own purposes. Help us to say 'no' to all that separates us from you. Help us proclaim what you have done for us, even when we run the risk of alienating friends or loved ones. Help us to know that giving our lives to you is the safest risk we will ever take. And as we give ourselves to you, let us also give ourselves to one another, providing an encouraging word to those who are lost, a comforting touch to those who are hurting, whether due to illness, injury, or emotional or spiritual turmoil. And where our resources are insufficient, Lord, provide your sense of healing, abundance, and peace for those in need. We pray all this in Jesus' name, and as he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.

